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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

May 2013

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, May 16, 2013, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speakers for the program will be Jeanne Richardson, president of the Krewe of Nereids, who will discuss the history of Mardi Gras and the Krewe of Nereids in Hancock County. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. Please call **by noon on Wednesday, May 15, 2013**, to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$10.00.



MONDAY, MAY 27, 2013



The British Period 1763—1779

By

Charles Gray

England's defeat of France in the seven Years' War brought an end to French rule in North America. As a result of the peace treaty signed by George III and France in 1763, the Gulf Coast became a part of the newly-created province of British West Florida. The Fleur de Lis was lowered and replaced by the flag of the British empire. By royal appointment, the first

governor was George Johnstone.

Governor Johnstone, a Scotsman by birth and a distinguished naval officer by achievement, arrived at Pensacola in 1764 and wasted no time sending garrisons to the various forts under his command. He sent them to Fort Conde at Mobile, which he called Fort Charlotte after the British queen; to Manchac, which was called Fort Bute; and to Fort Rosalie at Natchez. He appointed civil magistrates and organized a superior court at Pensacola, the jurisdiction of which extended over the whole province. It administered justice under the common law of England.

One would think that such

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HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor
Jackie Allain, PublisherPublished monthly by the
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"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

an explanation would be sufficient to illustrate how the present-day Mississippi Gulf Coast developed its English language and traditional English customs. However, such is not the case. The language of the people was French with Spanish being second. In fact, English was not used between the Pearl River and the Perdido until after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

Indeed, Governor Johnstone's extensive plans for the territory were never very effective. He did, nonetheless, begin the practice of giving large tracts of land to former soldiers and settlers. While this stratagem was excellent in attracting settlers to the territory, Governor Johnstone was a harsh man and became so unpopular with the people that he was forced to resign in 1768.

Even after three quarters of a century and the gifts of large tracts of land, the number of Europeans in the Gulf Coast area was small, and they were widely scattered. In fact, there were only about twelve hundred Europeans in the whole territory from Lake Pontchartrain's most westerly side to east of Pensacola in present-day Florida. Of these twelve hundred, only six families lived on the north side of Lake Pontchartrain. Moreover, there were but forty-eight families, about twenty of whom lived along the east bank of the Pearl River in the Pearlinton, Gainesville, and Logtown regions. In addition, there were about ten families at Bay Saint Louis and twelve families at Biloxi Bay, most of whom had

been driven off Cat Island in the hurricane of 1772. They consisted largely of people named Cuevas and Ladner. Farther east there were six families on the Pascagoula River.

Accordingly, because the settlers were widely scattered, one may conclude that reading and writing were probably relatively unknown as there were not enough people congregated in communities to warrant church buildings or school houses with teachers.

At any rate the French speaking coastal people had little interest in the arrival of the British, and politics definitely did not concern them. Thus, when control was switched after sixty-four years from France to Britain, the British directives had little actual effect on them. However, Spanish money was recognized as good since it was in hard coins.

Earlier in 1702 French explorer Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur de Bienville, had established the original seat of French government at Mobile, but he moved it from Mobile to New Orleans in 1723. As a result of this move, ships from Europe sailed around the Chandeleur Islands south of the Mississippi Coast because there was little of commercial value to be traded with the local people.

Apparently these local people did not dress with any concern for style. A Mr. Romans, who traveled through the area in the 1770's, later wrote that they did not wear shoes except in winter and then only Indian style moccasins, leggings,

or boots. They made their own cloth and dressed neatly in the style of the fishermen and hunters they were. The men wore cotton trousers and no-sleeve shirts without coats. If it was cold, a short cover type vest was worn, or in extreme cold, a blanket. Women were similarly neatly, but simply, clad as the climate permitted—usually in cloth dresses woven locally. Their manners and conversation were reported as being easy, moral, and entertaining.

Because immigration into the area had been very limited, these people, with Indian inclusion, were the descendants of the original settlers from 1699 to 1725. Written reports from the time characterize them as industrious and happy and content with their lot. Life was simple, though perhaps difficult.

Agriculturally the residents raised corn, indigo, potatoes, beans, peas, cotton, tobacco, and fruits such as pears, peaches, grapes, and plums. Poultry and eggs as well as herds of "black cattle" were reported around Mobile and Biloxi. The tar which they produced from pine trees was under British governmental control, so they smuggled it across Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans where there was a ready market. Skins from cattle or from deer and other pelts were among the few marketable items that the settlers had for trading.

Without barbers or hairdressers or even mirrors for that matter, long hair was apparently the custom but worn with a headband to keep it from inter-

fering with their vigorous labor when swinging an ax, building boats, hunting, fishing, cooking, milking, gathering pitch and turpentine, etc.

Since neither school nor church buildings existed, social gatherings were usually held in taverns, and alcoholic beverages were consumed. Any decisions made, if remembered, were never recorded.

Travel along the coast had traditionally been "along the coast," that is by water in an east-west direction between Pensacola and New Orleans. It was difficult to go north through the dense piney woods, crossing innumerable streams with few reliable trails.

Also, trade and eco-

nomic benefits for the coast's lumber, tar, charcoal, hides, pelts, cattle, and seafood lay exclusively in the large, nearby cities of New Orleans and, to a lesser degree, Mobile. There were no communications north and south such as mail, telegraph, or travel except by such rivers as the Pascagoula and Pearl and smaller streams leading into the Bay of Saint Louis or Biloxi Bay. These comparatively shallow waterways were good for rafting down, but difficult to canoe up.

The settlers to the north of the coast were mostly English-speaking and had emigrated from the Atlantic colony area. They sought British land grants to escape the coming turmoil they



British settlers moving into British West Florida traveled in many ways. Shown here are two of them—flatboat down the various rivers and overland by covered wagon.

could foresee in the American Revolution. As farmers of English-Irish-Scotch ancestry, they also wanted good farm land which was mainly up the Mississippi River on the high bluffs in the Natchez region. Also most of these people came downriver via the Cumberland or Ohio and Mississippi rather than by sea, so few were interested in the barren pine-covered sandy soil of the Mississippi coastal region.

After Governor Johnston resigned in 1768, he was followed by Governor Montford Browne, who abandoned his position in 1770. He was followed by Governor Peter Chester, who did not call a meeting of the Assembly (a governing committee selected from among the settlers) during his first six years in office. Finally called, the Assembly argued for thirty-four days, accomplishing nothing. They disbanded and never met again.

The Second Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War, and England was forced to surrender both East and West Florida to Spain, thus ending a relatively dormant period in the history of the Gulf Coast.

The Bay's Early Movie Houses

Edited by
Eddie Coleman

The first picture show in Bay Saint Louis was the Bay Pictorium, which opened in 1905 on the water side of North Beach Boulevard, formerly known as Front Street. Its owner/operator, W. A. Sigerson, advertised "a

change of moving pictures daily, beautiful illustrated song, a first class electric theatre with admission of a nickel but on Vaudeville nights, admission of a dime." On Wednesdays and Saturdays candy was given away.

Bay Pictorium had an air dome built over the water, and people sat on bleachers out in the open. The management furnished an insect repellent called Sweet

Dreams. In case of rain, patrons moved inside, the projector was reversed, and the Keystone Cops didn't miss a beat!

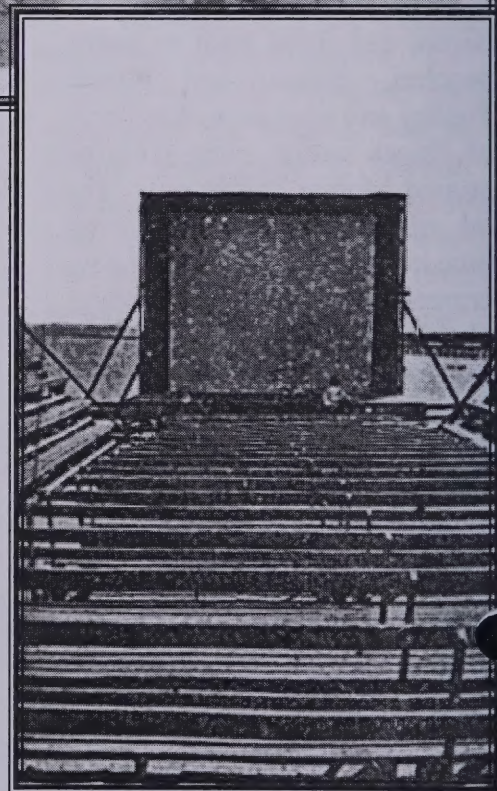
Mr. Sigerson sold the Bay Pictorium to Octave Fayard, who operated it until it burned in 1913. The building was valued at \$2,700.

In the spring of 1914, the first of three A & G movie houses opened on that site under the management of Geraldine Ames



The photograph at the top shows the 1914 A & G theater which was built on the water side of Beach Boulevard at 119 North Beach.

The bottom photograph shows the Air Dome, which stretched behind the above pictured structure onto the sand and apparently into the bay. Notice the wooden seats facing the movie screen and what looks like "bleacher" seating on the left and right-hand sides.





The A & G Theater at 150 North Beach Boulevard is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its designation reads, "A & G Theater (N. Beach): 1927. Spanish Colonial Revival. 1-story brick building with 2-story false front. Shaped and stepped parapet with ball finials. Recessed central entrance. Canopy. (p)."

and Philomene Gaspard. After a successful season another "air home" without walls or roof was added the following summer. Before long both were rebuilt and converted to one large building which served up silent pictures for about six years.

In 1927 the brick building housing the new A & G Theater, designed by architect William T. Nolan, was constructed across Front Street on the land side. At a cost of \$60,000, the two-storied building was 42' x 126', it seated one thousand patrons, including a balcony area, and it had a stage behind the movie screen.

The parapet housed the broad copper marquee lighted by electricity. It protected "its patrons against inclement weather conditions, at all times permitting them to drive up in their automobiles beneath its bounteous shade," said an admiring *Sea Coast Echo* reporter in the spe-

cial edition of the newspaper dedicated to the opening of this grand attraction at the intersection of Front and State streets.

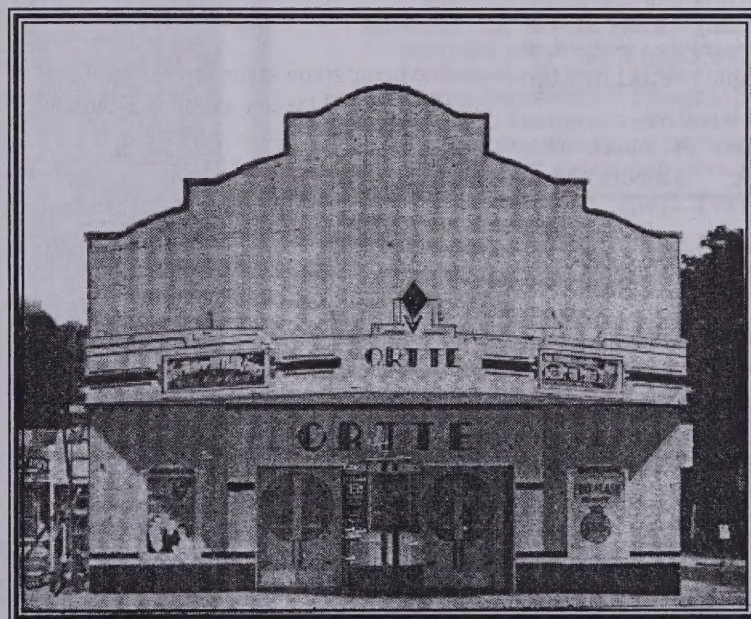
The interior boasted ornamented plaster, beam ceilings in barrel design, lighted by electricity in set conduits, "making it impossible for a fire to occur. It

[was] cooled by two arctic new air machines [driven] by electric motors thus providing comfort to the patrons even in the hottest seasons," reported the *Echo* article.

So enamored was the admiring *Echo* reporter with this bright new addition to the community that he dubbed the A & G "a thing of beauty [and] a joy forever"—perhaps not what the poet Keats had in mind.

The Bay's other picture show was the Ortte, which opened in the mid-1940's in a building on South Beach Boulevard at Washington Street that had housed a number of famous establishments in its day.

Built in 1894 to replace an earlier structure lost in a fire, the building was originally a dry goods store owned by August Keller. In 1921 it was bought by the group that reorganized the Bay-Waveland Yacht Club. When the club began to struggle after a couple of years, its leaders



Ortte Theater, owned and operated by Ed P. Ortte. It was described in a 1942 *Sea Coast Echo* article as "modern and convenient in every detail. Equipped with [the] latest type seats, correctly arranged, for comfort and vision and modern up-to-date machinery, [it] assures the public the best in movie photography."

staged a dance in the building in 1930, inspiring one of its members, Charles A. Breath, Sr., to acquire the building for a night club.

In the 1930's Mr. Keller's old store "changed hats" to become Uncle Charlie's Night Club, a lively gathering place in front of which yacht races were held.

Subsequently, Ed Ortte, owner of several movie houses, bought the building in the mid-1940's and opened the Ortte Theatre, which operated until 1955 when Joseph Scafide bought it and changed its name to the Star. In 1975 it was purchased by Kelvin Schulz, who continued to operate it as the Star Theater showing films and staging community theater plays, until 1984. At that time Schulz changed the commercial use of the building to a grocery store, known as the Big E. Unfortunately, the building was yet another victim of Hurricane Katrina.

SOURCES:

Back, Edith. "The Bay's Early Movie Houses." *Sea Coast Echo*. 19 August 1999, Tercentennial Edition" 11.

Sanborn Maps. *Bay St. Louis, MS*. New York: Sanborn Map Co., Ltd., 1893—1963.

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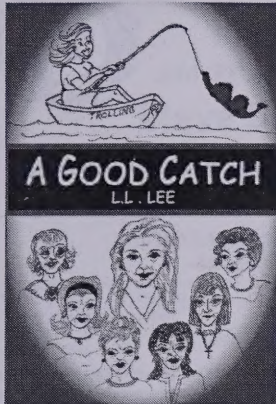
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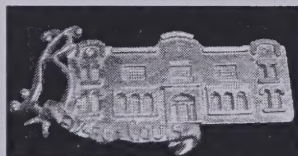
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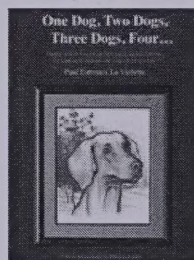


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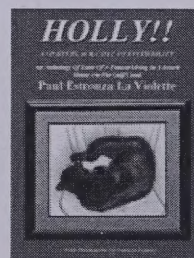
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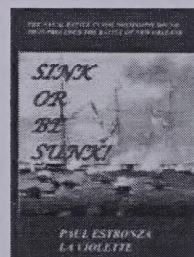
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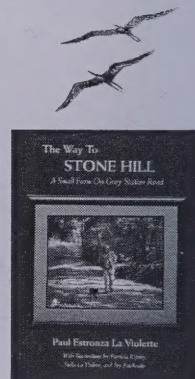
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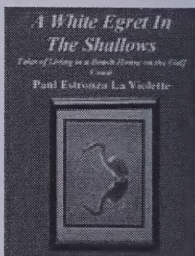
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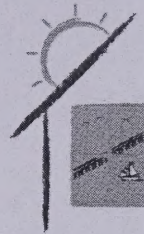
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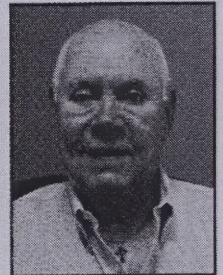
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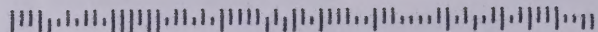
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